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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

FROM MAYFAIR TO PITTSBURGH¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

THE *American Diary* of Mrs. Clare Sheridan, the eminent British aristocrat, has the inestimable value and interest possessed by all frank disclosures of the foreign outlook upon our national scene; and who can doubt that Mrs. Sheridan is frank? It is the keystone of her autobiographical arch. It is her badge—her gonfalon. She wears the symbol of frankness as proudly and superbly as Cyrano wore his plume. “Deliciously frank” is the phrase contrived by her publishers to characterize the Diary. We shall not quarrel with the adverb, even though it is not precisely the one we should have chosen ourselves. But there are other epithets employed in the same public card of introduction: “Intimate, sparkling, gossipy revelations . . . of the impressions made upon this famous English society woman and sculptress by our leading men and women of society and letters.” In addition, it may be recalled that Clare Sheridan is the famous lady who invaded Bolshevik Russia and persuaded Mr. Trotsky, Mr. Lenin and other distinguished Muscovites to sit for their portraits in (we suppose) clay. And then Mrs. Sheridan, as is well remembered, came back and told the world all about the insides of contemporary Russia, through the medium of a diary published in *The New York Times*.

Her career, so far as it is generally known in these parts, has therefore been one of pitiless publicity. She is, it might be respectfully said, for open-work diplomacy. This was made manifest without delay upon her arrival in America in the winter of 1921. Mrs. Sheridan, as soon as she had docked, retreated to the austere seclusion of the Biltmore; but she was immediately informed that she had better submit to the addresses of the

¹ *My American Diary*, by Clare Sheridan. Boni and Liveright: New York.

newspaper reporters—"for if she were impatient or cross they would write something nasty" ["nasty", we hasten to remind those whose culture is of low visibility, is an Anglicism—strange to the American language—meaning simply "disagreeable"]. Mrs. Sheridan learned her lesson quickly. She was neither impatient nor cross. She even let a reporter ride with her in the taxi when she went to lunch—though she seems not to have made any attempt to get him past the butler. But no matter: she herself tells us all about those luncheons. "Hen luncheons," she calls them—"on Fifth Avenue." These functions were attended by "women with bare white chests [what color did Mrs. Sheridan fancy they would be? you cannot help wondering], pearls, and tulle sleeves. There is never a man." Mrs. Sheridan wonders if they can be contented. From this initial convocation of social poultry Mrs. Sheridan descended a bit lower—though not much lower—in the social lift. She was dropped at the *Vanity Fair* office, and there she encountered Mr. Crowninshield and Mr. Heywood Broun. Mr. Crowninshield qualified at once as "an angel", and a "humorous" angel; but Mr. Broun is more delicately extolled; his humor is "rather Latin—*moqueur*". Mr. Broun, having studied at Harvard, will know what she meant.

Two days later we find her dining at the Walter Rosen's with Mr. Louis Wiley and McEvoy the painter. It should have been a nice party; but alas, Mrs. Sheridan had to "leave hurriedly" for a lecture at Æolian Hall, where Mr. Broun, the Latin humorist, was again lying in wait for her, to introduce her to her first New York audience. Mrs. Sheridan found them "very quick and full of humor"—"on the idea before one had time to get to it oneself."

A few days later Mrs. Sheridan lunched with *The Times*. Mr. Wiley sent his car for her, and someone ("they", she says, but one suspects Mr. Rollo Ogden) gave her orchids. The next day was quieter. Mrs. Sheridan dined with Archer Huntington. It was a small party, and everyone talked low, and there was a great calm; though Mrs. Sheridan confides to us that her host treated her "like Lenin did" (Mrs. Sheridan will soon learn to speak correct American grammar)—which, if you are curious, was "smilingly and lightly", as if she were "not very serious".

Her next adventure was at a lunch given by her publisher at the Ritz. Here Mrs. Sheridan met a white-haired, fine-featured guest, standing "6 ft. 4", whom she quaintly took for a relative of Rupert Brooke, the poet; but it turned out to be only Mr. Barney Baruch (and it is no doubt true, as Mrs. Sheridan explains, that if you say it fast and casually, it *does* sound like "Brooke"). However, Mr. Baruch proved himself "brilliant" and "interesting" and "unprejudiced", and, happily, "a friend of Winston".

Soon after we find her resorting for solace to Pittsburgh, where she went to inspect the national genius in one of its most productive manifestations, the Heinz manufactory. Here, at last, she found serenity, beauty, order. "Everything looked like a Whistler picture." She saw marble columns, fountains, marble busts on pedestals, and a frieze by an English artist representing the various Heinz processes. With fascinated eyes she watched the process of building the nest of the baked bean—saw "the flat piece of tin go into the machine, become round and soldered, move along to have its bottom put on, and, without stopping, go careering along overhead to the next floor to be mechanically filled with baked beans, and have its lid put on"—a process which, she learned, takes just four and a quarter minutes.

Thrilled and uplifted, Mrs. Sheridan boarded a sleeper (where she passed a wakeful night of horror, infuriated by the nocturnal whistling of traveling salesmen and the flouting of her midnight privacy), and returned to New York. Thereafter Mrs. Sheridan's oscillations became almost as swift and engrossing as the enchanting miracles she had witnessed in the home of the Baked Bean. On the 10th of March we find her lunching with the Morgans, where one got "the impression of being with Austrian Royalties"; and then there is a breath-catching transition to Croton, where Mr. Boardman Robinson—"looking like Judas Iscariot, or maybe it's St. Peter"—is to be found lying on his stomach in the grass listening to a girl singing old English folk songs, while Floyd Dell emerges from behind his briary bush, and others of the Hudson Intelligentsia stroll about in blouse shirts and corduroy trousers, "like French *ouvriers*".

And then Mrs. Sheridan went West, to Movieland, where she

had her famous encounter with Charlie Chaplin. She was permitted to "work on Charlie's head"—by which she means that she made a bust of it; and meanwhile she enjoyed the opportunity of studying the great man at his ease. It appears that Charlie's home-life was moody, fluctuant, and slightly sybaritic. He started the morning in a serious vein, garbed in a brown silk dressing gown. But soon his mood changed; he went upstairs and reappeared in an orange and primrose gown. Later, there was a camping trip. Tents were pitched in a quiet spot by the sea, and late into the night they sat over the camp-fire. "A half-moon rose, and little veils of sea, like gossamer, swept over the dunes, and the shiny eucalyptus stems cast black shadows. Mingling with the cries of the night-birds came the rhythmical sound of the sea. One by one the lanterns in the camp flickered and went out. Charlie sat huddled up before the flame, an elfin, elemental creature with gleaming eyes and tousled hair, his little nervous hands raking the embers with a stick. His voice was very deep, the voice of a much bigger man. He ruminated moodily. He said it was 'too much—too great—too beautiful—there are no words—'" Mrs. Sheridan sees for Charlie a great future. "He is so immensely bigger than the work he is engaged in. I believe that if he survives, he may in a very few years take a very big place in our international public life." Mrs. Sheridan envisions him standing for Parliament—for she has heard him "make impassioned speeches to imaginary crowds. He has harangued the sand-dunes". It is an enthralling vision: Charlie in the Cabinet . . . Charlie as Prime Minister . . . Sir Charles . . . Lord Hollywood. . . .

We come, now, to Mrs. Sheridan's conclusions upon the subject of American civilization. She has ranged widely over the national scene, from Charlie's bungalow to the Morgan Library. You have a wild, confused, phantasmagoric impression of blended extremes—mixtures of things that don't mix, yet seem to have accomplished the impossible: Fifth Avenue "hen luncheons" with the tomato sauce of the Heinzes; Mr. Bob Chanler, with his "roar like a bull", singing old English folk songs with Floyd Dell; General Vanderbilt whistling himself to sleep in an upper berth. Yet Mrs. Sheridan herself is clear, definite, convinced. Our

society is "purely social", not intellectual; and hence dull. Elsewhere in the world, a dull society may be varied by its vice. But here we are "less vicious (apparently) and more dull, less intellectual, and more overwhelmingly conventional. In the United States, the Puritan origin has dominated over all other races with which it has eventually become amalgamated; stronger than the Latin is the Puritan—stronger than the German, the Dutch, the Irish, or the Jew. In this amazing country even the mature foreign element is bent, broken, molded, forced into an American! And in a very short space of time. It is this standardization that surpasses individuality. . . ." But let us close upon a happier note. Mrs. Sheridan found here one institution which she can unqualifiedly indorse—the American firefly. Let her tell it in her own lyric prose: "We were sitting on the piazza at dusk [this was at Rye, N. Y., on Long Island sound]. It was a Sunday night. I had one of the great surprises of my life. It will be as memorable as any of the big events that have come to me. I asked, pointing to the bushes: 'Am I mad? What is that?' 'That is a firefly.' I had heard vaguely of fireflies, but no one had ever described to me what a June night in America could be like." Mrs. Sheridan yearns for an American poet who will sing about the fireflies—as, she says, "W. B. Yeats has written of Ireland that '*the night was full of the sound of linnets' wings*.'" Ah, no, confiding Diarist: he wrote something quite different. How can you, with your sensitive artist's soul, bear to misquote a perfect line from a perfect poem? Let us quote, for our pleasure and your refreshment, the matchless lyric that you have jazzed—

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a-glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.